10 Reasons to Under-program Your Church

I'm a big fan of the "simple church" concept, but I have experienced just how daunting a task it can be to under-program my church. We are inundated constantly with opportunities for activity from other churches (which we don't want to turn down lest we appear uncooperative and standoffish), advertised "movements" local and national (which are good at getting people excited), and "good ideas" from our own community (which we are reluctant to deny lest we break someone's heart). But what all this so often amounts to is a church that is merely busy, and busy does not always equal diligent or successful.

Here, then, are 10 reasons to under-program a church:

1. You can do a lot of things in a mediocre (or poor) way, or you can do a few things extremely well. Craig Groeschel has some great things to say about this subject. Also check out Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger's Simple Church.

2. Over-programming creates an illusion of fruitfulness that may just be busy-ness. A bustling crowd may not be spiritually changed or engaged in mission at all. And as our flesh cries out for works, many times filling our programs with eager, even servant-minded people is a way to appeal to self-righteousness.

3. Over-programming is a detriment to single-mindedness in a community. If we're all busy engaging our interests in and pursuits of different things, we will have a harder time enjoying the "one accord" prescribed by the New Testament.

4. Over-programming runs the risk of turning a church into a host of extracurricular activities, mirroring the "Type-A family" mode of suburban achievers. The church can become a grocery store or more spiritual YMCA, then, perfect for people who want religious activities on their calendar.

5. Over-programming dilutes actual ministry effectiveness. Because it can overextend leaders, increase administration, tax the time of church members, and sap financial and material resources from churches.

6. Over-programming leads to segmentation among ages, life stages, and affinities, which can create divisions in a church body. Certainly there are legitimate reasons for gathering according to "likenesses," but many times increasing the number of programs means increasing the ways and frequencies of these separations. Pervasive segmentation is not good for church unity or spiritual growth.

7. Over-programming creates satisfaction in an illusion of success; meanwhile mission suffers. If a church looks like it's doing lots of things, we tend to think it's doing great things for God. When really it may just be providing lots of religious goods and services. This is an unacceptable substitute for a community on mission, but it's one we accept all the time. And the more we are engaged within the four walls of the church, whether those walls are literal or metaphorical, the less we are engaged in being salt and light. Over-programming reduces the access to and opportunities with my neighbors.

8. Over-programming reduces margin in the lives of church members. It's a fast track to burnout for both volunteers and attendees, and it implicitly stifles sabbath.

9. Over-programming gets a church further away from the New Testament vision of the local church. Here's a good test, I think: take a look at a typical over-programmed church's calendar and see how many of the activities resemble things seen in the New Testament.

10. Over-programming is usually the result of un-self-reflective reflex reactions to perceived needs and and an inability to kill sacred cows that are actually already dead. Always ask "Should we?" before you ask "Can we?" Always ask "Will this please God?" before you ask "Will this please our people?" Always ask "Will this meet a need?" before you ask "Will this meet a demand?"